

# Changing Content of Hindu Religious Terminology\*

P. D. DEVANANDAN

In the long history of Hindu religious thought a traditional religious vocabulary has developed. It contains many terms, originally employed in the many Hindu Scriptures, which have passed over into the different Indian languages with slight local variation, still serving as current coin in religious commerce. Indian Christian religious terminology in the different regional languages is largely constituted of these same words. I believe that one of our major tasks in this generation is to face the problem which is created in consequence. The problem is inevitable. We as Christians have also to use those very words which these many years have been used in the context of a different religious system. Many of those words involve certain assumptions which are peculiar to Hinduism. And Hinduism being so complex and varied, consisting as it does of many religions within what is now known as *sanatana dharma*, these assumptions tend to change according to levels of Hindu culture and schools of sectarian thought. Our difficulty in this regard seems to me to be two-fold. On the one hand, there is the difficulty of divesting these terms of the assumptions implied in their Hindu usage. On the other hand, there is the task of investing these very words with Christian meaning. The commonly used word *avatara* is an instance. Some would hold that such Christian concepts as 'Sin', 'Salvation', 'Incarnation' and the like cannot be fully expressed in what appear to be corresponding words in the Indian language because there is a conceptual difference which is radical. Some would claim, however, that in the process of time the Christian usage of these terms can be established and that by long continued conversation not only would the difference in meaning-content come to be accepted but that through such conversation the claims of the Christian Gospel and the convictions of Christian faith can be fruitfully communicated. Perhaps the part of wisdom is to see how both these approaches can be combined, and try to discover what words can be acceptably adopted and used, and what words newly coined can be helpfully introduced

---

\* A paper prepared for the Bible Translators' Conference, held in Nagpur in October 1960.

if the true meaning-content of Christian religious concepts are to be preserved.

It is in this connection that I have ventured to answer briefly the question of how the *sanatana dharma* itself has faced this problem created by common religious vocabulary within Hinduism, among different religious schools of thought, and by the use of common religious terms in Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism as well as in the more modern Hindu religious movements such as Sarvodaya. This paper suggests an answer in a very cursory way. But if it succeeds in providing a discussion which would throw further light on the subject my purpose in initiating the discussion would have been more than justified.

It seems to me that there are three outstanding characteristics which are in a sense peculiar to Hindu religious terminology. One is the tendency to use negative terms such as *advaita*, *avidya*, *ahimsa*, *aparigraha* to convey positive meaning. Another is to use the same word for altogether different concepts, so much so that some of these words acquire an elastic nature, capable, if need be, of being stretched to include many concepts and of being narrowed down to stand for a single concept. *Dharma* and *Karma* are two very common instances which fall into this category. The third tendency is to use a word to convey the meaning of a double concept which in fact is an equation of both. The common use of the word *Atman* to imply at the same time the concept of the individual self and the Ultimate Self as an instance. Similarly the word *Maya* to convey the double meaning of *sat-asat*, that which is and that which is not.

Perhaps a little more may be said about each of these trends to invite further discussion. The word *ahimsa* is still translated as non-violence, or non-injury. But it has a wealth of positive meaning-content. The meaning of the word is drawn out more and more by stating what it stands for now—in the context of present-day world-life. Its negative meaning of 'Don't hurt living things' (because of assumption of *karma-samsara*, as especially in Buddhism and Jainism) is not what is conveyed by the word now. The meaning now is rather, 'Regard life as valuable' and what is more, it is not merely 'life' in the abstract but specifically life in the human person. So that it is now really used to imply (not actually to stand for yet) the worthfulness of the human person. One wonders whether it is at all associated with the belief in *karma-samsara*, where the modern Hindu mind is concerned. But if you were to ask a modern Hindu what he would regard as a fundamental tenet of Hindu *dharma* he would certainly claim that *ahimsa* is one. Similarly the term *aparigraha* is gaining remarkable meaning-content as it is used in Sarvodaya theory and practice. Literally meaning non-grabbing, along with *asteya* and *ahimsa*, it originally stood for an ethical principle from Upanishadic times on. But with the dynamic meaning-content now given it by Vinoba Bhave and Jaya Prakash Narayan, it is one of the basic concepts which has set Hindu India moving towards a

'socialistic pattern of society'. The original bias of an underlying individualistic ethic is no longer stressed. The idea is not that one gathers individual merit thereby and works out his own liberation from bondage to *karma-samsara* but that one makes possible community-being and social justice through *aparigraha*.

When all this has been said about new positive conceptual content put into traditional negative terms, we must not overlook the fact that these reformers (following in the wake of the greatest of the moderns) had to accept a newly coined word for the new religious and ethical outlook, namely, the word *sarvodaya*. In the same way, it may be pointed out that but for the term Vedanta, no doubt similarly coined, the negative terms such as *advaita* and *avidya* would not have acquired all the rich content and amazing variety of interpretation with changing times, as they still continue to do in our day.

The history of Hinduism would also indicate that it permitted considerable elasticity in the use of certain terms like *dharma*, *karma* and so forth. They developed a capacity to stretch far enough to comprehend many concepts. They conveyed more than one meaning at the same time. Religious concepts in the vast complex of Hinduism thus came to be telescoped, as it were, into one another. The two words, *dharma* and *karma*, I have cited as examples, have a way of shading off in several directions so as to cover a wide area. Nevertheless, these terms are also capable of being used with a limited meaning-content which is defined by the context of the discourse of thought. Again, they have been taken over by Buddhism and Jainism and as basic concepts in both these systems they have come to acquire diverse, but specific meaning.

Our interest is, of course, not in these words as such but in the concepts for which they stand. But as used in most Indian languages—and terms of this category seem to be current in practically *all* regional languages—they are multi-conceptual, as it were. *Dharma* would imply at least three things: a code of ethics regulating conduct; a system of religious practice concerned primarily with worship, and a body of beliefs dealt with rather from the standpoint of metaphysics than as credal affirmations. This comprehensive application of the term nevertheless does not prevent the Hindu from limiting its application to narrow confines, as when the word *dharma* is used for ethics (cf. the classical *catur varga*, viz. *dharma*, *artha*, *kama*, *moksha*). Because of the inherent advantage that this category of elastic concepts implied in these terms, they are being more and more employed in contemporary *sanatana dharma* in order to bring out its comprehensive character as the religion of all Hindus. Moreover they lend themselves to easy modernization in that they can be applied to convey new meaning in our day. Recently I was told by a Svami of the Ramakrishna Order of the need in our present age for a 'Technological *dharma*'!

Whatever the original meaning of the word *karma*, the underlying concept of 'deed' now interpreted as 'action' has shifted emphasis from the 'act' to the 'agent'. The word *karma* is still employed (again in its multi-conceptual sense), but attention is focused not on the deed but the doer, the *karta*, as in some sense responsible in the making of his destiny in the network of human relations he now is, and not as a victim resigned to the fate of his past *karma*. Apart from the interpretation of 'self-sacrificing work' put on such terms as *nishkama karma* by Sarvodaya leaders, modern interpreters of Vedanta like the Sankaracharya of Conjeevaram and Svami Chinmayananda of Kerala revert to the meaning of 'religious action', 'worship', 'what have to be done to the gods', and consequently stress the Hindu *anushtana* and *samakara* (acts of worship and keeping of the prescribed sacramental rites) as the *responsibility* (*karma*) of modern Hindus.

Turning now to the third type of terms used in Hindu thought, let me recall that they comprise of words which stand for a double concept which in a way juxtaposes both what it is and what it is not. This is not a case of a synthesis of a thesis and an antithesis, but an affirmation which amounts to saying 'Yes' and 'No' at the same time. *Sat-asat* acceptance of a 'both-and' is a Hindu dialect which seems confusing to those who are used to rigid alternatives of 'either-or'. But from the early beginnings of Hindu religious speculation the tendency has been to see identity in pairs of opposites (*dvandva*) and that has been regarded as the part of true wisdom. So much so knowledge itself (*jnana*) in the final analysis ceases to be the result of an encounter of the knower and the known by the ultimate realization that they are in fact identical.

The word *maya* stands for the various forms of belief which all imply that this word both is and is not. In many regional languages the word *maya* is also used to mean 'magic', the *mysterious* coming to be of something which does not in fact exist. At any rate, there are terms in Hindu religious thought which when employed in discourse imply four things: (1) A particular concept (e.g. *loka*, *atman*, *guna*); (2) Another concept which may be either its opposite or its counterpart (e.g. *maya*, Brahman, *saguna* and *nirguna*); (3) The acceptance of both concepts as separate and as in some sense valid in present experience; and (4) That in the final count (i.e. in terms of trans-experience of mystic apprehension) they are to be regarded as identical, in some sense the same. So differences matter and don't matter. This trend of development of conceptual thought is not confined to Hindu monists alone; it is also current among Hindu theistic sectarians and is very much in evidence also in modern schools of Hindu thought. This accounts for the characteristic adaptability of *sanatana dharma* to changing times: its willing accommodation to diverse and contradictory beliefs and practices: and above all, for its present claim to be 'tolerant'.

When all this has been stated I should go on to add that there are abroad three new forces in our country which have created, and are continuing to create, noticeable changes in Hindu religious concepts. These forces are: (1) Contemporary social and political thought associated with nationalism; (2) Christian values mediated through Western liberalism, humanism and secularism; and (3) Modern technology and the increasing importance given to the sciences in present-day education in all levels. What we should note is that although Hindu religious *terminology* has not changed, the *concepts* for which these terms stand have changed, and in some instances quite radically. And I am inclined to believe that this has been possible largely because of the three characteristics of Hindu terminology that I described earlier on in this paper.

Democracy is more than a pattern of government: it involves a way of life. And essentially that way of life is new to Hinduism. It may even be regarded as in some ways un-Hindu, not merely non-Hindu. Nevertheless it is becoming an accepted pattern not only of our political but also our social life. In consequence of the many concepts that have vitally entered into our living and thinking, perhaps the two most revolutionary are *Personality* and *Community*. Hindu thought had taken account of 'individuality' as expressed in the variations of *nama* and *rupa* for practical purposes of classification and description as in the *varnashrama* structure of society. But the idea of the worth and dignity of human person which we now associate with the concept of personality, and the idea, again, of the network of human relations, the community within which that worth and dignity are both realized and guaranteed, are both new to us in India. Contemporary Hindu religious leaders have revived two significant terms from the Baghavadgita for the purpose and given them a wider interpretation without doing unnecessary violence to their original meaning-content. These terms are *svadharma* and *loka samgraha*. In so doing they have also added new meaning to the traditional concept of *karma* and radically restated the basic principle on which the caste structure of Hindu society is based. One realizes his *svadharma* (i.e. becomes truly a person) by purposefully fulfilling his privileges and obligations in society, and the *rationale* of *varnadharma* is not to be found in its keeping the *varnas* independent and apart but in drawing them together into a sense of interdependence and solidarity which is *loka* (people) *samgraha* (held together).

The word *seva* so much used by our Hindu friends today stands for a concept which I have advisedly stated as 'representing Christian values mediated through Western liberalism, humanism and secularism'. I am yet to be convinced that the modern use of the word 'service' for which we Christians today claim some sort of a monopoly is wholly described by the original concept associated with the New Testament word 'diakonia'. Non-Christian Western liberalism, humanism and secularism of the Age of Enlightenment in Europe had a great deal to do with

widening the implications of the original Christian concept of 'diakonia'. I am convinced however that the element of 'concern' which is characteristic of 'service', and especially in the concept underlying the term 'seva' (as against *nishkama karma*), is fundamentally a Christian contribution to Hindu thought. That I believe accounts for the frequent admonition by our national leaders that all 'seva' be done 'with missionary zeal' meaning really 'in the Christian spirit'.

The influence of modern technology and the study of the sciences on changing Hindu concepts it is difficult to forecast, because this impact is only just beginning to be felt. The precision which insists on careful distinction characteristic of the scientific temper, the insistence on positive proof in terms of the concrete as against airy speculation of possibilities in the abstract on which rests all technological advance, are two revolutionary forces with which Hindu religious thought will have to contend in what my Vedantin Svami friend called the Age of technological *dharma* which we are entering. On the other hand, the pressure of the impersonal attitude towards life and the assumption that the phenomenal world is determined by inviolable laws of cause and effect, which need no explanation from outside the world as we know it, might well result in putting new meaning and significance to the basic concepts of Vedanta. The Hindu intellectual seems to be aware of the need for another overwhelming experiment in accommodation—the Hindu himself prefers the term 'synthesis'—to the new era of technological culture. The changes involved create a problem which has to do not with words but with concepts which words are meant to convey and with experiences which underlie the concepts. But there is something even deeper than difference of conceptual framework. Modern technology stands for a radically new understanding and experience of the world and of man's place in it, which is still for the most part unarticulated and unrecognized. There is the gulf that has to be bridged between the traditional concepts of religion and the temper of technological culture. Here Christian and Hindu find themselves strongly on common ground, for whether we like it or not we use a common religious vocabulary. The questions are 'Does it make sense?', 'Will it make sense to the man of Technology's tomorrow?'